DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 488 TM 014 397

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TITLE The Nevada Proficiency Examination Program: Evaluating the Writing Samples.
INSTITUTION Nevada State Dept. of Education, Carson City. Planning, Research and Evaluation Branch.
PUB DATE Dec 86
NOTE 32p.; Contains 18 brief essays presented in students' handwriting.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Essay Tests; Grade 9; Grade 12; *Graduation Requirements; High Schools; Interrater Reliability; Letters (Correspondence); Paragraph Composition; *Scoring; Screening Tests; *State Programs; *Testing Programs; Test Results; Test Use; Writing (Composition); *Writing Evaluation; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Nevada Proficiency Examination Program; *Writing Samples

ABSTRACT

Writing tests are part of the mandated statewide proficiency examination in Nevada. The ninth-grade screening test and the eleventh-grade diploma-certifying test require that a student write a paragraph and a business letter, each on an assigned topic and each at an acceptable level of proficiency. Pilot tests, extended discussion, and statistical analysis are used in developing the bank of selected topics. The Nevada writing test is administered in October and March. Evaluating the more than 26,000 writing samples is a formidable task, requiring the training of teachers from every school district as scorers. The instructions for the test are included and the arrangements for the test reading and scoring process are described. Each sample is read independently by two readers, with review by table leaders or the head reader as necessary. Papers are scored from four to zero, with any score below "two" unacceptable. Score criteria are defined and sample papers are given for each score category for the paragraph and business letter. It is emphasized that the tests are not intended to be diagnostic, although help in writing is recommended for students who receive a grade lower than "two." (SLD)

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The Nevada

Proficiency Examination

Program

EVALUATING THE WRITING SAMPLES

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Prepared by:

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Planning, Research, & Evaluation Branch
December 1986

TM014397

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BACKGROUND FOR THE WRITING TEST

One part of the mandated statewide proficiency examination focuses on the student's ability to write. The ninth grade test, administered for screening purposes, and the eleventh grade diploma-certifying test, both require that a student write a paragraph and a business letter, each on an assigned topic and each at an acceptable level of proficiency.

The State Board of Education is authorized by law to prescribe the test, and the topics are determined by the Nevada Department of Education. The Department conducts pilot tests of proposed topics. The pilot tests are then scored by selected Nevada teachers under Department supervision, and topics are selected for the topic "bank" only after extended discussion and statistical analysis.

Items which are used in the Nevada High School Proficiency Examination in Writing are developed and selected so that they will have, to the extent possible, all of the following characteristics:

1. Items will be simply and clearly stated.

2. Items will engage students quickly in the composing process, rather than making them analyze extensively to determine what should be written or how it should be written.

3. Items will allow, but not require, complex thought and complex responses. Items will not require that students write on topics which cannot be handled easily in a single paragraph.

4. Items will encompass topics of concern to students, but topics which students would hesitate to discuss will be avoided.

5. Items will give all students (e.g., both rural and metropolitan, and all ethnic and racial groups) equal opportunity to respond.

6. Items will draw upon areas of experience common to all students.

7. Items will not elicit dull or predictable responses.

8. Items will not cause political or moral controversy.

9. Items will not elicit responses toward which some raters might have a strong reaction and, therefore, score the writing unfairly.

The writing test is administered statewide in October and March. The tests are scored in Reno, Las Vegas, and in one rural district under Department supervision. The scores on all writing tests are forwarded to the districts along with the scores of the reading and mathematics examinations.

The task of reading and evaluating more than 26,000 writing samples is a formidable one. Experienced English teachers from every school district must be trained as readers and as table leaders. Training sessions are conducted in Reno and Las Vegas and in other locations as needed.

During each year every effort is made to validate procedures and to examine every aspect of the writing evaluation program. Independent review panels subject the process to careful scrutiny and make useful suggestions. The staff, of course, keeps informed on the state of the art nationally. In addition, special work and training sessions bring experienced table leaders together for intensive examination of the program.

The purpose of the Nevada writing test is to identify students who need additional help in writing. This will allow schools to assist these student to improve the quality of their writing so that they may achieve a level of at least minimum proficiency by the twelfth grade and can be certified competent in writing for purposes of graduation.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE WRITING TEST

The test is administered by the local school districts. Instructions issued to student and school personnel are designed to make the administration of the writing test as uniform as possible. Students are given one hour to write their paragraphs and business letters. The written instructions students were given for the writing test in the spring of 1986 are as follows:

INSTRUCTIONS AND EXAMINATION TOPICS

FOR THE SPRING 1986

NEVADA HIGH SCHOOL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION IN WRITING

Use on March 12, 1986

Please pay close attention to the instructions for each writing exercise, and be sure that you write on the assigned topic or situation in each exercise.

Failure to write on the assigned topic will result in a failing score.

You should use scratch paper to make rough drafts so that your answer sheet will be as neat as possible.

Your paragraph should be approximately five to ten sentences long, and your business letter should be approximately three to eight sentences long.

When you have finished your rough drafts, check them for spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, meaning, organization, and format.

Neatly copy your final drafts onto your answer sheet. Be very careful to write your paragraph on page 3, which is labeled "WRITING TEST - PARAGRAPH' and your business letter on page 4, which is labeled "WRITING TEST - LETTER."

When you write on the answer sheet, please press firmly so your writing is easy to read.

PARAGRAPH TOPIC:

> Think of an object which was important to you when you were a child. Write an essay describing the object and explaining why it was important to you.

BUSINESS LETTER:

> Think of a situation in which some worker (for example, in a store restaurant, or garage) has been very helpful. Write a business letter to that person's boss. In the letter, describe the situation and praise the worker for being so helpful. The names, addresses, and information in your letter may be factual, invented, or a combination of fact and fiction.

THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE READING

The reading and evaluation of writing samples is supervised by the Nevada Department of Education. One group of trained teachers reads in Reno and another group reads in Las Vegas. Other exams are read by teachers at a site rotating among the small districts in northern Nevada.

The physical arrangements for the scoring sessions are worthy of comment. A large room (often a school library) is used for the occasion. The readers and table leaders gather early on the appointed day and are seated five or six to a table with a table leader assigned to each group. Each participant has an assigned number which is used to identify his or her work. There is a warm-up session (described later), and well before 9:00 a.m. the reading begins in earnest.

After fifty minutes of intensive reading, the head reader calls for a break. Coffee and juice are available and the readers relax for ten minutes before returning to their tables.

A staff of "runners" provides the readers with a constant supply of student writing samples. The reader holds a completed "batch" aloft, and an alert runner takes it away and gives the reader another batch to score.

Lunch is catered. Sandwiches, soft drinks, coffee and fruit are served -- outdoors if the weather allows. This innovation has proven effective in keeping the reading team intact during the entire day. After lunch there is another warm-up and more intensive reading until the task is complete.

During all of this activity, a support staff of trained workers under the direction of a testing manager controls the flow of papers, checks for discrepant scores, and assigns problem papers to the head reader for resolution. This team works in an adjacent room, and its members perform tasks which are essential to the smooth operation of the scoring session.

All concerned with the operation work hard for a full day under considerable pressure. There is an air of excitement and exhilaration in the process. Perhaps it is not a situation in which all are comfortable, yet there is a certain fascination which draws many of our finest readers back to successive sessions.

THE PROCESS OF HOLISTIC SCORING

The holistic reading and evaluation method has been used to score writing samples in college entrance examinations, Advanced Placement Examinations, and similar tests for many years. It is based on the premise that the whole piece of writing is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, judgement is rendered on the writing sample's overall impression rather than on a scoring of errors and strengths. The assumption is also made that trained and experienced English teachers recognize good writing when they see it.

The procedure used for reading the Nevada Proficiency Examination in Writing is as follows:

1. Two days prior to the general reading, the head reader, who has overall responsibility for the project, works with table leaders to prepare for the scoring. Table leaders are teachers trained in the process and selected on the basis of experience and previous performance. After discussing the questions and possible responses, they read sixty to ninety papers and score them on a scale of 1-4, four being high.

2. The head reader and the table leaders discuss the results of their scoring, frequently addressing themselves to particular problem papers. They then select as "sample papers" those that appear, by virtue of their scores, to be clearly "ones," "twos," "threes," or "fours." These are then duplicated to be used in the "warm-up" process at the general sessions.

3. The head reader, generally with the help of the table leaders, then develops a scoring guide or "rubric" to assist the readers in assigning scores to their papers. This guide is based on the qualities observable in the "sample papers." Examples of these rubrics are provided later in this booklet.

4. On the appointed day, the readers, table leaders, the head reader and the support staff gather for the reading. The head reader conducts a warm-up session, using the sample papers previously selected. The purpose is to refresh the readers in the scoring techniques and to be sure that all agree on the descriptors provided in the scoring guide. As the warm-up session moves along, there is increasing unanimity in scoring the sample papers and, at a point, the head reader decides that the readers are ready to read "live" papers and the reading begins in earnest.

5. When the reading begins, the readers are given numbered batches of twenty-five tests. There are five or six readers at each table working under the direction of a table leader. The table leaders constantly spot-check the scores being assigned by their readers and offer guidance as needed. This process provides a check on the consistency and quality of the reading. Table leaders are particularly useful in helping readers with problem papers.

6. Each paper is read independently by a second reader seated at a different table from the original reader and from whom the first reader's score has been concealed.

7. If a paper receives scores that differ by two or more points or if one score is passing and the other is failing (e.g., 2-4, 1-3, 1-2, the score is considered a "discrepancy" and receives a third reading, this by the head reader or someone designated by him or her. Additional opinions may be sought if the head reader feels this is necessary. In the general process, actually, many papers are given three or more readings. The sample papers are read five to ten times; many papers are checked by the table leaders; questionable papers are also checked by table leaders, and discrepancies are resolved by the head reader.

Any inconsistencies relating to these scores arising from philosophical differences among readers, table leaders, and the head reader are resolved by conference at the scoring sessions.

RUBRICS AND WRITING

In order to clarify for parents, teachers, and administrators the meaning of the scores assigned on the Nevada writing examination, we shall provide certain information on the writing tests administered in 1986. Any score below the level of two is considered unsatisfactory.

The Paragraph - (March 12, 1986)

The paragraph problem was as follows:

> Think of an object which was important to you when you were a child. Write an essay describing the object and explaining why it was important to you.

The table leaders and the head reader used the following scoring guide to assist readers in evaluating the writing samples.

Students are given credit for what they do. All responses are to receive an appropriate score. Some students may write more than one paragraph. this should not raise or lower the grade. The reader's judgement of the quality of the paper should include a judgement of the skill with which the writers express their views.

SCORE 4 -- Tne "four" papers will clearly address the topic and present specific examples or reasons for their choice. They will demonstrate a discernible pattern of paragraph organization, a consistent stance, a degree of sophistication, and a command of conventional usage and mechanics.

SCORE 3 -- The "three" papers will address the topic and present examples or reasons. They may differ from the "four" papers in their:
- looser organization or less specificity,
- correct, but less mature sentence structure,
- average application of usage and mechanics,
- ordinary, but appropriate vocabulary.

SCORE 2 -- The "two" papers will address the assignment, but may not develop the response beyond generalities. "Two" papers may not be well organized; they may shift their point of view, reverse their direction, or dart off on a tangent. They may also be marked by other writing problems. Sentences may lack variety and sophistication, but the paper will not appear illiterate.

SCORE 1 -- The "one" papers may attempt to address the topic, but may do so only incidentally. They may lack a discernible pattern of organization. They may reveal serious and persistent problems in mechanics and sentence structure, suggesting a general lack of competence in communication, or they may appear illiterate.

SCORE 0 -- The "zero" paper is not "worse" than the "one" paper; it is different. The "zero" paper will be one of three types only:

a. the blank paper,
b. the obviously "canned" response,
c. the paper clearly off the topic, but not "canned."

All papers that make a response to the topic, however rudimentary, must be assigned a numerical score of "one" to "four."

All "zero" papers must be read and confirmed by the table leader.

It is clear that there will be a range of quality within each scoring level. All "fours" are not of uniform literary excellence. The key is that two or more readers came to general agreement as to the level each paper achieved.

The following are selected sample papers to illustrate the levels of scoring. They are printed here exactly as the students wrote them. They do not represent the "best" or the "worst" papers, but rather they are typical, middle-of-the-range selections at all four levels. They were scored in the evaluation session. The comments are those of the editor and supply only a suggested rationale for the assigned score.

Score 4

Immeasurably important to me as a child was my kitten. I was young when I received it, so we grew up together. As I watched my kitten grow into a thriving, healthy adult cat, it saw me grow into a teenager. This type of relationship helped us grow into immediate companions and friends. Also, my cat was my friend when it seemed like I had no one else. Because young children play childish games, I did not have many friends who liked my type of games. My kitten would never object to any of these games and almost seemed to enjoy them. In addition to everything else and probably most importantly, we learned together and taught each other. I taught my kitten normal activities like how to ask for food and the tedious job of house training. Although it seems unusual for a cat to teach a human something, she taught me responsibility because I had to feed, groom, and care for her. It is evident why my cat was valuable to me as I grew up.

This clearly addresses the topic and develops a response of considerable complexity. The treatment of the kitten is imaginative and consistent.

When I was five or six years old my mother presented me with a stuffed turtle which she had skillfully constructed herself from foam rubber and various scraps of fabric. It held a lot of meaning for me, not so much as an object to love, but as a possession to make me equal to my older sister. I must admit I was envious of her and her tattered burlap cat. My turtle was of a higher quality, though, and as I would gloat over the plush hexagons that made up his back, one of my eyes was always searching for any signs of jealousy or longing in my sister's face. But even though I never got the satisfaction of seeing green on her face, I found that I was attached to the turtle, even long after she deserted her cat. I believe I realized that I was loved as much by my parents as my sibling, and the turtle was just an embodiement of that love.

The writer of this paragraph reveals keen insight and an ability to perceive the turtle as both object and symbol. The use of descriptive detail marks this as very carefully crafted for an extemporaneous response. There is no indication of serious problems with conventional usage and mechanics.

Score 3

When I was a child I had a very special stuffed animal. It was Grover from Sesame Street. I can't remember a time when I was parted from Grover until I turned 5. He gave me confidence and always seemed to cheer me up. I think Grover was so special because I got him for Christmas. He was all I asked for and Santa brought him to me. I still have Grover and he's still special, but I don't need to carry him around with me anymore.

This response is clear and direct. The sentences are less varied and mature and the vocabulary less precise than one sees in the "four" paragraphs.

Score 3

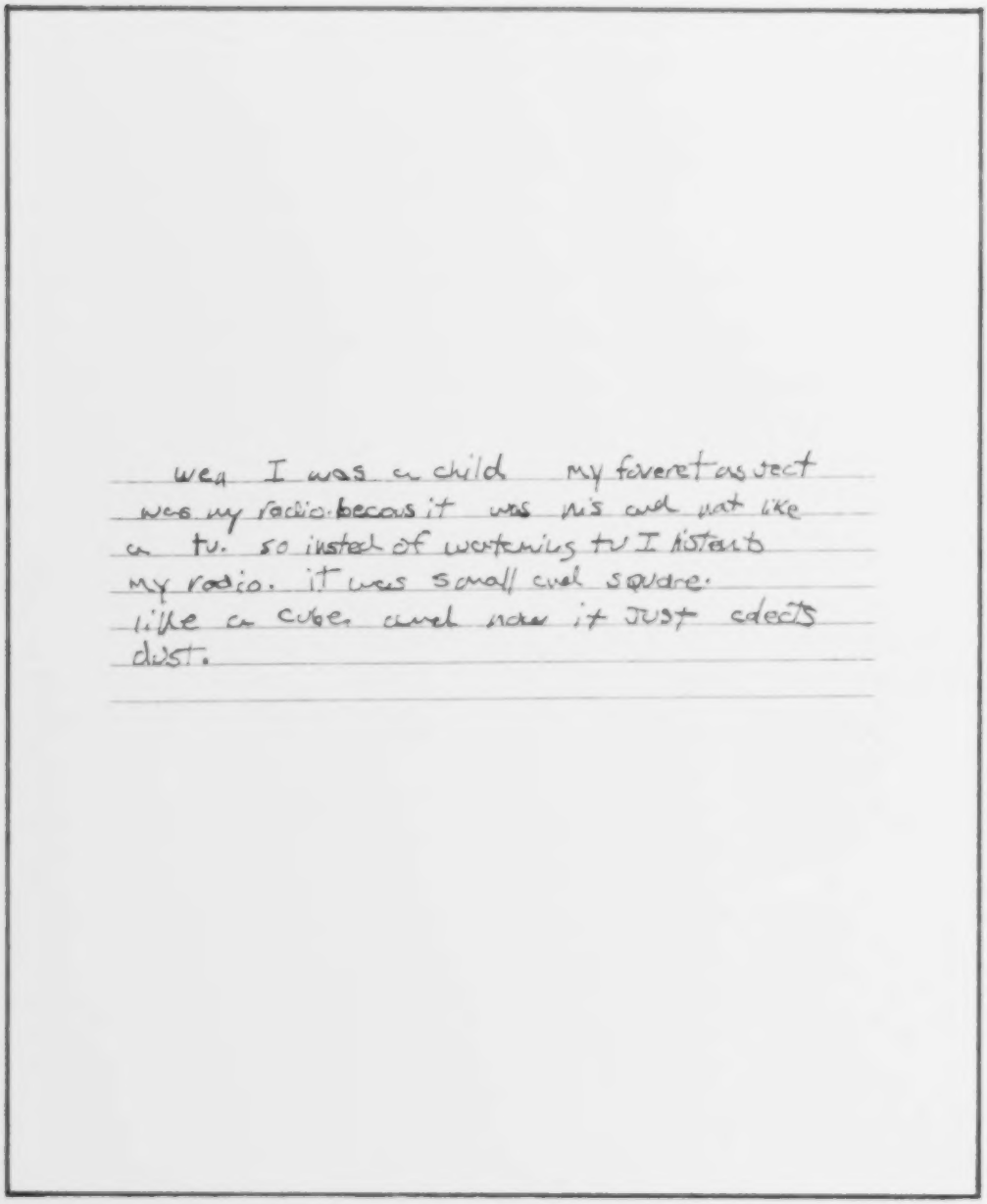
When I was a child I possesed a small figure of a fat boy, that was very important to me. The figure, a trivial object, was made out of clay and roughly designed. Although its' appearance was dull, it held a deep significance to me, it reminded me of myself. The fat boy was also unusual, since when I played with it my imagination had no limits. As I grew older my desire to play with the clay fat boy weakened, but was remembered. So every day when I see him placed by the kitchen window, I remember the fat boy from my childhood.

This student writer presents an unusual object from his childhood. The idea, however, never really develops, and the "deep significance" is explained only in surface terms. There are some sentence or punctuation problems which detract from the writer's otherwise neatly structured paragraph.

I got A STUFFed cat when I was born. It looKes like a tiger cat with little brown spotts all over it. I have had it for 18 years and I don't think i could depart with it. It is getting kind of old and beat up. But I have had it for 18 years.

While this paragraph lacks sentence variety and sophistication, it does address the assignment. There are some mechanical problems, but this is not an illiterate paper. It clearly lacks the distinction of the three and four level papers.

Score 1


wen I was a child my favoret as ject
was my radio. becaus it was nis and not like
a tv. so instad of wortching tv I listanb
my radio. it was small and squdre.
like a cube. and now it just edects
dust.

While this paragraph addresses the topic, it presents serious problems in mechanics. The writing is such that one can only guess at what words were intended.

Score 1

I like to ride my bike in a raceing.
I injoy ride in a raceing.
I like to where my hellment in a race.
I like to where my race pans in a race.
And most of all I like bike.

The writer attempts to address the topic but does so only incidentally. There are obviously persistent problems with mechanics, and there is little evidence of sound organization.

Score 0

Friendship is a very important relationship based on mutual respect. The most important qualities in a friend are loyalty, understanding, and kindness. A friend must be loyal to be trustworthy and to retain the title of "friend". Otherwise, there will not be a mutual respect and the comaraderie will not be long-lasting. Understanding, another quality of an ideal friend, means that he will respect the opinion and the point of view of the other. This trait of understanding is important since it is a basis of mutual respect and thus, needed for a meaningful relationship. Kindness is also a basis for mutual respect since it is respect for the other's feelings and therefore an important quality of a friend. The most important trait of these described is understanding. If a friend is understanding, all of his other faults may be overlooked. However, if he is not understanding, the basis for mutual respect will be destroyed, as will the friendship.

This paragraph illustrates the kind of "zero" paper that is most devastating. It is very well written, well organized and clearly focused. But it is not remotely responsive to the assigned topic. Moreover, it is written on a topic assigned on an earlier test and is, consequently, an obviously "canned" response.

The Business Letter - (March 12, 1986)

The business letter problem was as follows:

> Think of a situation in which some worker (for example, in a store, restaurant, or garage) has been very helpful. Write a business letter to that person's boss. In the letter, describe the situation and praise the worker for being so helpful. The names, addresses, and information in your letter may be factual, invented, or a combination of fact and fiction.

The following rubrics assisted the readers in evaluating the student writing samples:

Students shall be rewarded for what they do well in response to the assignment.

There are several acceptable forms for business letters. No one form is exclusively correct. There are, however, common ingredients.

a. sender's address
b. date
c. inside address
d. salutation
e. body
f. complimentary close
g. signature

Readers should allow for differences in instruction as far as form is concerned.

SCORE 4 -- In the "four" paper, the form should be virtually without error and the body of the letter largely free of mechanical problems. These considerations, however, should be balanced with the student's mastery of prose in the body of the letter. The "four" paper will clearly address the assignment. Such a paper will be written in a tone that is appropriate and may reveal a spark of invention, wit, or originality.

SCORE 3 -- The "three" paper differs form the "four" in the level of its sophistication and mastery of expression. The form will be reasonably correct. The body of the letter will address the assignment and will be free of serious errors in sentence structure and mechanics, but the "three" paper will lack the maturity and polish of the "four" paper.

SCORE 2 -- The "two" paper may reveal problems in form, but may be categorized as a "two" paper if there are compensating factors in the body of the letter. The "two" letter may address the assignment in only a general way. There may even be some serious, but not pervasive, problems in sentence structure or mechanics.

SCORE 1 -- The "one" paper may show basically acceptable form, but may contain copious mistakes in sentence structure and mechanics. The "one" paper may show serious errors in, or lack of, acceptable business letter form. The "one" paper may fail to address the assignment coherently or may digress from or address only tangentially the purpose of the assignment.

SCORE 0 -- The "zero" paper will be one of three types only:

a. the blank paper,
b. the obviously "canned" response,
c. clearly off the topic, but not "canned."

All papers that make a response to the topic, however rudimentary, must be assigned a numerical score of "one" to "four."

All "zero" papers must be read and confirmed by the table leader.

The following samples of student business letters were scored in the evaluation session. The comments are those of the editor and supply only a suggested rationale for the assigned scores. The return addresses and the student names have been blocked out.

Score 4

[redacted]

Judi's Boutique
3767 Marshall Road
Las Vegas, Nevada 89102

Dear Sir or Madam:

I would like to commend an employee at your boutique for her kind and gracious service. Recently I visited the boutique, and was pleasantly surprised by the cheerful, thoughtful help I received from your cashier, Miss Janice Wood. I was looking for an item in your store, and when I was not able to find what I wanted, Miss Wood called several stores in the area and inquired as to whether they carried the item. Soon she had located a store that did. I would like to thank Miss Wood, and say that it is nice to know that I can rely on excellent service at Judi's.

Sincerely yours,

[redacted]

This letter is direct and clear. There is sufficient invention of detail to make the situation and the response quite believable. The tone is consistent and appropriate throughout.

Score 4

[redacted]

Mr. Garcia, Manager
1095 Keystone Drive
Reno, NV 89509

Dear Mr. Garcia:

Three weeks ago, my husband and I dined at your restaurant located at 1095 Keystone Drive. We had a very enjoyable meal in your lovely restaurant. When the check came, however, we were short $10.00. Your head waiter, Pierre Gillaume, was very polite and eager to help us in this tragic situation. He suggested that my husband ran home to get the money while I awaited at the restaurant. My husband did get the money. When he returned, Pierre thanked us for dining at "Jeremiah's" and we were escorted to our car.

He helped us out of a very embarrassing situation and was extremely polite. We offer you our thanks and congratulations on such a well trained staff!

Yours truly,

[redacted]

Despite a conclusion that falls below the level of the earlier paragraph, this letter is the work of an imaginative student. Details, like the name choice for the head waiter, add to the texture of the prose. These qualities, and relative freedom from mechanical problems, make this letter a clear "four."

Score 3

[redacted]

Manager of 76 Gas Station
7453 Creekside Drive
Walnut Creek, California
89123

Dear Sir,

I am very thankful for when you helped my mother the other day, 3-9-86. She said she had gotten a flat tire and pulled into your station and one of the men that works for you, Dave Kessler, was very helpful and nice to her, by changing the tire very quikly and making sure very thing else on the car was running. And I would like if you could give him my thanks.

Sincerly Yours,

[redacted]

This letter reveals characteristics of a "three" paper. While the form is reasonably correct, the general level of the writing is clearly below that of the "four" letters. Although marred by spelling errors, the letter clearly addresses the topic and provides some necessary detail.

Score 3

[redacted]

THE MONTELEONE HOTEL
401 ROYALE STREET
NEW ORLEANS 91040

DEAR SIRS:

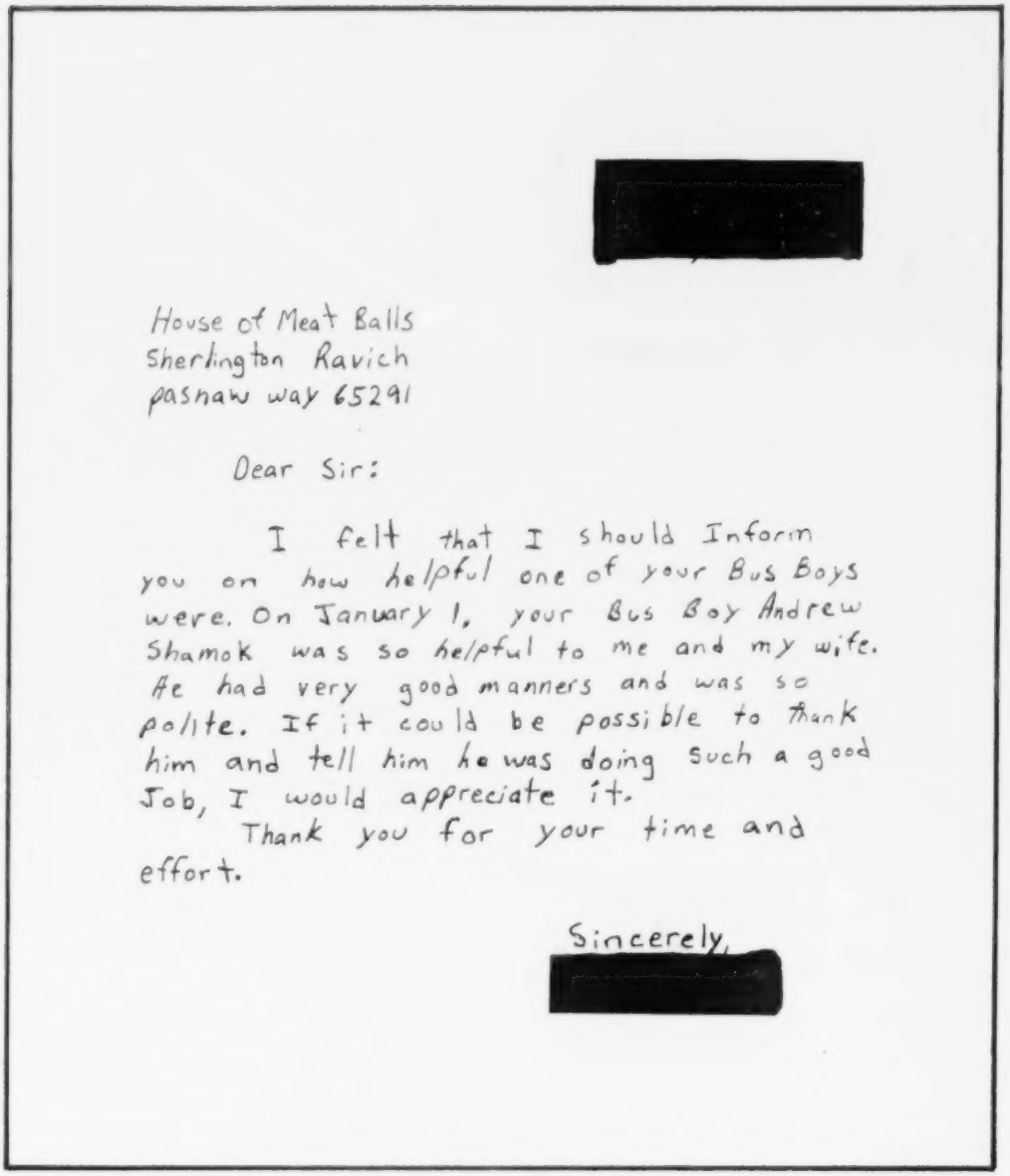
I'D LIKE YOU TO THANK A YOUNG BELLMAN BY THE NAME OF CHRIS EWING FOR ME. WHEN I WAS STAYING AT YOUR HOTEL. A WEEK AGO, SOMEONE TRIED TO BREAK INTO MY ROOM. LUCKILY MR. EWING SAW HIM AND SAVED MY MANY JEWELS FROM BEING TAKEN. I WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE WAY HE COURAGEOUSLY, BUT QUIETLY, WENT IN AND KNOCKED THE BURGLER UNCONCIOUS UNTIL HELP COULD ARRIVE. CONGRATULATIONS ON SUCH A DEVOTED AND SINCERE WORKER. GOOD WORKERS ARE HARD TO FIND!

SINCERELY,

[redacted]

The author of this letter presents a scenario that lacks originality, but still responds to the assignment. Mechanically the letter is adequate despite the sentence fragment, but it lacks the maturity and polish of the "four" papers.

Score 2



[redacted]

House of Meat Balls
Sherlington Ravich
pasnaw way 65291

Dear Sir:

I felt that I should Inform you on how helpful one of your Bus Boys were. On January 1, your Bus Boy Andrew Shamok was so helpful to me and my wife. He had very good manners and was so polite. If it could be possible to thank him and tell him he was doing such a good Job, I would appreciate it.

Thank you for your time and effort.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

There is a discernible drop in quality as one moves from the "three" to the "two" level. This paper reveals correct form, but there are problems in the body of the letter. It lacks the detail observable in the stronger papers. This mix of strengths and weaknesses is typical of a relatively strong "two" paper.

Score 2

[redacted]

Jones-West Ford
365 Kietkze Lane
Reno, Nevada 89511

Gentlemen:

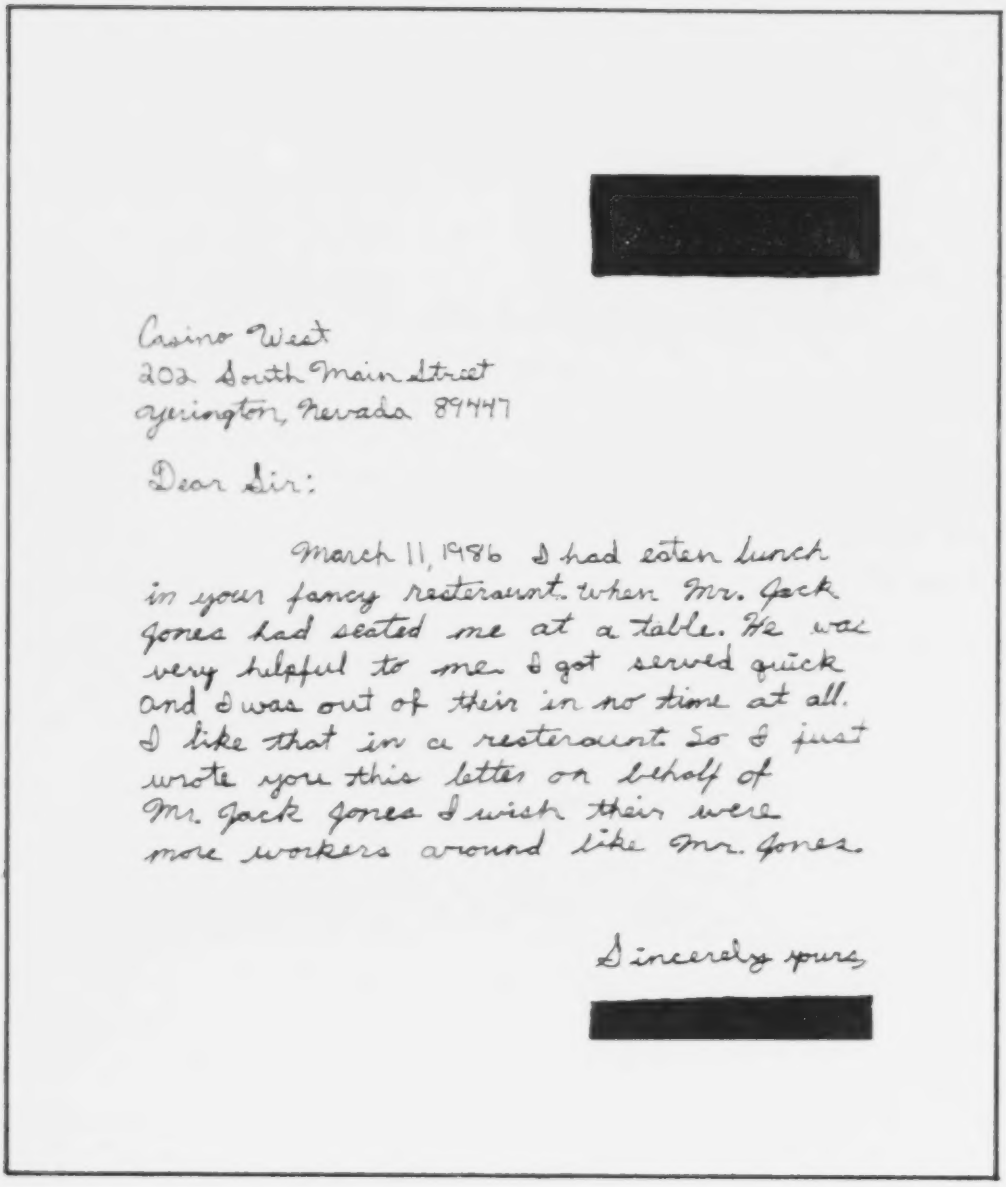
When I was recently in your establishment, I got very good treatment and service by one of your mechanics whose name is Tony Kuzmik, I would suggest you reward this man for his superb service

Yours truly,

[redacted]

This letter represents a basic response to the assignment which lacks even any pretense at development. The single sentence illustrates the "comma splice," so the author's grasp of basic sentence structure is suspect. The lack of detail and extension leaves one with a safe, but minimal response.

Score 2



[redacted]

Casino West
202 South Main Street
Yerington, Nevada 89447

Dear Sir:

March 11, 1986 I had eaten lunch in your fancy resteraunt. when Mr. Jack Jones had seated me at a table. He was very helpful to me I got served quick and I was out of their in no time at all. I like that in a resteraunt. So I just wrote you this letter on behalf of Mr. Jack Jones I wish their were more workers around like Mr. Jones.

Sincerely yours,

[redacted]

Serious problems in mechanics and sentence structure plague this letter. The word "restaurant" was spelled correctly on the exam, and needed only to be copied. The confusion of "their/there", tense sequences, and the sentence fragment all mark this as a minimal "two" paper.

Score 1

Id like to thanke our staf foul a wunderfull Stay. We hand at our Houtel. We love to Stay at the Dasitt inn we well all was choose it whin" we come throw las Vagis. We all so would like to thank the room sivice four makeing so meney trips to our room. Im shire they injoed it so we thank you and. Hop you have the Smue State when we come throw Las vagis agine.

The total lack of form without compensating factors in the what appears to be the body of the letter dooms this response. Mechanical and structural problems abound to the degree that the author fails to communicate effectively.

Score 1

[redacted]

ROUTE 7, BOX 387
FERNLEY, Nevada 89408

Dear Mister Red

I am righting these letter For the Appreciation and the thanks. I got For moving MY home. Bob showed Me a lOT OF easy things. IN his line OF work. Thank You

Sincerely Yours

[redacted]

Despite some problems in form, the weakness of this response lies in the body of the letter. Sentence errors are pervasive and the letter makes very little sense to this reader.

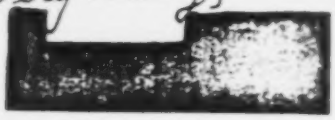
Score: 0

Wonder Shirt Company
432 Elm Avenue
Reno, Nevada 89502

Dear Sirs:

We would like to order one dozen sports shirts for our school bowling team. We need 4 small shirts and 4 medium shirts and 4 large shirts. We want all light blue shirts. Please send them to us as soon as can be.

Very truly,



This letter is not responsive to the assignment. It is a letter ordering shirts for a team, not remotely related to the topic. It is probably a "canned" response, reflecting some practice writing in preparation for the exam.

THE USE OF THE TEST SCORES

It is important for teachers and administrators to note that this test is not, nor does it purport to be, a diagnostic writing test. The scores the students achieve should generally be quite consistent with the student's in-class performance on impromptu assignments. The students' day-in and day-out writing, read analytically by competent teachers, should yield excellent diagnostic information. The scores on this test should confirm the classroom teacher's estimate of student performance on this kind of writing assignment.

If a student's test score falls markedly below the classroom teacher's expectation, the teacher should confer with the student to see whether some special circumstance may have inhibited the student's performance. Personal problems, poor testing environment, or failure to take the test seriously might be suspected. Then too, some students may not have had experience in writing impromptu assignments. Certainly, further writing assignments in class, followed by an analysis of problems these assignments reveal, will help teachers to determine individual weaknesses and to design appropriate remediation.

While a score of two (2) indicates that the writer has been judged minimally competent, most students who receive such a score need help. Often they are perilously close to failure. The "two" paper may communicate something, but it will not communicate much, nor will it communicate with felicity. Students who write "two" papers need to write frequently. Their weaknesses need to be analyzed, and they should be given special help with their composition. These marginal writers should be marked for day-to-day help in English classes.

A student may receive a "one" grade for doing no more than stating the topic assigned with little or no development. This student is "rewarded for what he or she does well." But the blank paper or the paper that fails utterly to be responsive to the topic should and does receive the zero grade. The "zero" paper is not "worse" than the "one" paper; it is different.

The problem of the "zero" paper is a bit perplexing. In one sense the matter is academic since all students whose scores fall below two (2) are recommended for help in writing. Yet, there is more than one way that a paper may be designated a "zero."

First, of course, is the blank paper. Second is the paper that clearly does not address the problem in any way. This kind of paper can result from failure to read or understand the topic. Third, a few students submit obviously "canned" material. For example, imagine a paragraph on antique rifles in response to a question on the influence of parents or guardians on the individual. We feel that the use of prefabricated paragraphs or letters should be discouraged.